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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002934

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/11/2016

TAGS: ECON IS LE MOPS PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: COUNCIL OF THE SOUTH PRESIDENT COMPLAINS
OF CONFUSION IN RECONSTRUCTION EFFORT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) Qabalan Qabalan, President of Lebanon's Council of the South, insisted that his organization had been given the responsibility by Prime Minister Siniora to replace all housing units destroyed during the recent hostilities, as well as the repair of damaged "civil society" structures, such as clinics, schools, and community centers. Qabalan stated, however, that a parallel (and rival) government agency, the Council for Development and Reconstruction, had been assigned the larger infrastructure projects (roads, water, electricity, sewage), as well as responsibility for coordinating the numerous foreign donor "adopt a village/bridge" projects. Qabalan complained about several issues: Siniora's perceived attempt to "over centralize" reconstruction decision-making, the "chaotic" situation in the south regarding NGOs, and the attempt by Lebanon's other confessional groups to gain advantage when it was the Shia community that "bore the brunt" of the conflict. But none of these complaints were surprising considering the relative loss of political power suffered by the Amal-controlled Council of the South in recent years. End summary.

¶2. (C/NF) Qabalan Qabalan, who owes his position and political allegiance to Speaker Nabih Berri, met with poloff on September 8 at the tattered headquarters of Council of the South in south Beirut. Mr. Qabalan is a close relative of Acting Chairman of the Higher Islamic Shia Council Abdel Amir Qabalan and projects highly partisan views when discussing the "plight" of Lebanon's Shia community. Qabalan mentioned he was finishing his tenth year at the helm of the Council and gave the distinct impression he was tired of both the job and the process.

QABALAN FEARS BEING SIDELINED

¶3. (C/NF) Qabalan, whose office was dominated by a large annotated map of south Lebanon detailing war-damaged infrastructure, said his agency had completed a comprehensive damage assessment of the region and now believes 9,500 housing units were either destroyed or severely damaged south of the Litani. Qabalan said that Prime Minister Siniora had instructed his agency to manage the housing reconstruction effort, as well as the repair of damaged hospitals, schools and community centers, but then complained that very little additional funding was being provided. Qabalan said he was attempting to get clarification from the Prime Minister, but

had been told to wait until a full accounting could be made of international donor contributions.

¶14. (C/NF) The veteran Shia administrator and Amal loyalist complained that he felt his agency was being relegated to a secondary role in the Government's reconstruction program, but that Siniora would soon realize only the Council could effectively execute the task in south Lebanon. (Note: The Council of the South, long a source of political patronage and influence for Amal leader Nabih Berri, is widely considered by most Lebanese to be an opaque and wasteful agency whose primary mission is to direct political spoils to the Shia community. In other meetings with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Siniora has confidentially expressed his desire to minimize its influence. End note.)

¶15. (C/NF) Qabalan ruefully stated that a rival government agency, the Sunni-dominated Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), appears to have won Siniora's mandate to manage big-ticket reconstruction projects: electrical grids, roads, bridges, water and sewage plants. When asked if CDR could effectively perform the task in Shia-dominated south Lebanon, Qabalan threw up his hands with an expression of mild disgust. When asked about earlier Government indications that Ghassan Taher-Fadlallah, a close Shia business acquaintance of PM Siniora, might be tapped to become Lebanon's reconstruction czar, Qabalan flatly said it was not in the cards, since Taher had no recognition nor power base in the south.

¶16. (C/NF) It was clear that Qabalan was not satisfied with the state of reconstruction affairs when he began a long recitation of complaints of governmental "inaction and

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confusion," and emphasized the fact he was not consulted on the Government's presentation at the recently concluded Stockholm Conference. Qabalan did concede that PM Siniora's apparent decision to allow donor countries to "select and manage" projects could speed up the reconstruction process, but he questioned whether Nabil el-Jisr, Siniora's new CDR director, would be able to monitor all the donor projects, in addition to his infrastructure responsibilities.

HUMANITARIAN RELIEF SUCCEEDED
-- IN SPITE OF ITSELF

¶17. (C/NF) Concerning the humanitarian and emergency relief effort, Qabalan expressed mild incredulity it somehow had all worked out. He gave the greatest credit to the considerable capacity of the Lebanese people "to take care of their own," specifically, family and village-based loyalties. He said he believed that was why several hundred thousand IDPs unexpectedly returned to their home regions in a massive and unplanned surge in the days following the August 14 cease-fire -- he maintained they simply wanted to return to the relative security and familiarity of their villages, even though many places were severely damaged.

¶18. (C/NF) Qabalan said he appreciated the generosity of the NGO humanitarian effort, but was dismayed by the "chaos and waste" of competing and inexperienced organizations. He spoke of numerous villages who received windfalls of food, water and medicine, while other villages badly in need received nothing. Qabalan was particularly critical of the various UN agencies operating in the south, who he said "listen to no one but themselves."

URGES UXO RECEIVE THE HIGHEST PRIORITY

¶19. (C/NF) After strongly criticizing America for "supplying most of Israel's ordinance," Qabalan urged the USG to focus its significant resources on UXO removal. He said that in the agricultural south, it wasn't only UXO located in

inhabited areas that was dangerous, because sooner or later either farmers or shepherds would inadvertently, and probably fatally, uncover ordnance located "in great numbers" across the fields. Qabalan expressed hope that US and European technology and experience could be employed to render safe all the areas in the south that had experienced combat.

¶10. (C/NF) Without giving specific reasons why they deserved special attention, Qabalan expressly requested UXO removal assistance in the villages of Blida, Aitaroun, Maroun el Ras, Aita al-Shaab, and Beit Lif. The Amal leader said he was especially concerned that an concentrated effort be made before the autumn rains commenced in a few weeks.

EXPRESSES ANGER AT US ...AND
SOME SECTORS OF LEBANON'S SOCIETY

¶11. (C/NF) In closing, Qabalan again criticized US support of Israel during the war and said we are now held in very low regard in the south, but said he hoped our assistance (which he acknowledged was significant) may be a harbinger of a new relationship. Unexpectedly, he also emotionally criticized "certain communities" in Lebanon who "did little" to assist south Lebanon's Shia community during the war, but were now "acting as if they suffered just as much as if they had lived in Bint Jbeil."

COMMENT

¶12. (C/NF) We agree with much of Qabalan's criticism regarding conflicting or unclear information on donor coordination. But we also note that Qabalan is hardly a disinterested observer. PM Siniora has told us separately (and privately) that he does not intend to have donor funds flow through the Council of the South, and Qabalan probably senses this reluctance. Siniora bases his hesitation on what he describes as bad experience with the Council of the South during Lebanon's post-war reconstruction. He also has expressed fear that, given the Council's bad reputation, no oversight could be scrupulous enough to prevent Michel Aoun from scoring political points, were the GOL to put money into

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the Council. But Siniora does not enjoy unanimity from his own political base on this point. Others, including Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt, want the Council of the South to play a prominent role in the reconstruction of the south, and if some money is lost, that is fine: they see the goal as promoting Nabih Berri (the patron of the Council) as a Shia voice not wholly dependent on Hizballah. Thus, the lack of clarity about the Council's role is rooted in part to the lack of clarity among key Lebanese figures about whether the Council is a virtue or vice.

FELTMAN